

In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi'ism and the Making of Modern Lebanon

By *Max Weiss*

Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010, 356 pages, ISBN 9780674052987, \$39.95.

An observer of contemporary Lebanon may be struck by two interrelated aspects of Lebanese politics: 1) the continuing predominance of sectarian identity as an essential and deeply ingrained aspect of Lebanese society, to the extent that it is the defining feature of the Lebanese political system to this day, and 2) the rise to political prominence of the Shi'i sect, and its political organizations, namely *Hizbollah*. The latter point is particularly interesting given that historically, the Shi'i community was marginalized and neglected, a fact that has been reflected in the major historical accounts of Lebanon, which tend to focus on the role of other communities, such as the Maronites and Sunni while downplaying or even ignoring the significance of the Shi'i.

Enter Max Weiss' "In the Shadow of Sectarianism," an important book, which goes some way to correcting this anomaly by bringing back the Shi'i community to the centre of Lebanese history and providing what amounts to a fascinating study of the evolution of Shi'i sectarianism in the making of modern Lebanon. His conceptual handling of sectarianism, which he addresses in his detailed prologue is relevant and sophisticated, and has comparative value for understanding how the processes of sectarianism evolve (whether in Lebanon or elsewhere).

His conclusions on the future of sectarianism in Lebanon are equally relevant, and those scholars, advocates, politicians and

others who believe that sectarianism in the Lebanese political social environment can be undone or should be eliminated because of its obviously many drawbacks, would do well to closely read Weiss' conclusions. In fact, it is worth including here a somewhat detailed extract from his epilogue: (p. 236)

If Modern Lebanese sectarianism has been made, it can certainly also be unmade. Like the making of Lebanese sectarianism, though, the unmaking would inevitably hinge on complex institutional and discursive transformations as well as profound reconceptualizations and reformulations of deeply entrenched systems of law, ideology, and culture. This most difficult task of imagining and building an alternative, non-or trans-sectarian social and political framework would work against many of the inertial forces now hegemonic in Lebanese political, cultural, and civil life. Such an agenda, moreover, would have to be addressed to restructuring educational, media, political and legal institutions, all the while showing respect for alternative modes of identification and associational life.

The body of the book provides a case study on the evolution of Shi'i sectarianism through the lens of social, legal, and religious history during French mandate (1920s-1940s), a period in which much of

the territories inhabited by the Shi'i community came under Lebanese territory. Weiss' findings are based on field research conducted in Lebanon during 2005-2006 in which he made use of primary sources previously ignored, namely documents from the Ja'farishari'a courts. As he explains, "despite its controversial position as part of the colonial state bureaucracy, the Ja'fari court was the most important Shi'i institution in Lebanon prior to the establishment to the Supreme Shi'i Islamic Council in 1969." (p.35) The Ja'fari court was empowered to adjudicate matters of personal status – marriage, divorce, inheritance, property, etc. - and was the key institution linking the Shi'i community and the State. It is, apparently, the first book to rely on the records of the Ja'fari courts, and this point alone makes the book well worth reading.

Through his readings of the Ja'fari court documents, as well as other sources, Weiss explains the critical processes that helped to shape Shi'i sectarian identity. An excellent example of how this dynamic worked follows: (pgs. 3-4)

Shi'i sectarian identity was fundamentally, albeit gradually, being transformed and reimagined during this period. Through administrative techniques reliant upon formal recognition – namely, the sanctioned public performance of hitherto forbidden religious practice as well as the establishment of new jurisdictions of Shi'i "personal status" which would subsequently be developed into the broader category and practice of family law – the French colonial state contributed to rendering the Shi'i community in South Lebanon and Beirut more visible, more empow-

ered, but also more sectarian, in ways that it had never quite been before.

In fact, as Weiss saw it, the process was "so gradual, so subtle" that most historians simply missed it. Rather, they appeared to have looked to the second half of the 20th century and the rise of a movement led by the charismatic Musa Sadr as the departure point of Shi'i sectarian identity, political mobilization, and empowerment. Weiss' account corrects this view arguing that the gradual historical process of transformation of Shi'i sectarian identity had gone on for much longer than was previously recognized, and was particularly active during the French mandate period.

Weiss' treatment of the mandate period, and, in particular, the interaction between the colonial power, and the Shi'i community that lived within Lebanon's borders is particularly well done. He develops a complex picture of this interaction in which both parties are willing participants in the development of Lebanese institutions, and the overall political process; in fact, one could say that the Shi'i community was willingly co-opted. Weiss refers to this process as "sectarianization from above," colonial or elite strategies of divide and rule, and "sectarianization from below," simultaneous Shi'i demands for sectarian rights and religious recognition.(pgs.11 and 231).

As Weiss explains, the "Shi'i community was actively seeking to find a way to integrate into the national leadership and the state structure," (p. 210) during the mandate period. He argues, for example, that the Shi'i leadership was trying to gain greater political power, and felt left out of the National Pact, the unwritten agreement between the leaderships of the Sunni and Maronite communities that effectively

carved out post-independence political power in Lebanon between them to the detriment of other communities including the Shi'i. Weiss' argument helps to break certain myths regarding Shi'i passivity or indifference to the Lebanese state during the mandate period.

With respect to the organization of the book, it is not a long or difficult read – a prologue, epilogue and six chapters over 236 pages, and also includes a pre-mandate historical account of the Shi'i community in its traditional geographical homeland Jabal 'Amil. The book is, however, designed for the specialist in Lebanese history/

politics, although the wider community of historians and social scientists who are interested in 1) the relationship between the colonial power and the colonized, and 2) the complex processes involved in the formation of identity including sectarian identity, would also benefit from this study. We are, after all, seeing a resurgence of latent communal identities throughout the Arab world, and are entering a period of strong sectarian tensions, so a book that provides some context for understanding sectarianism is a welcome read.

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Are Muslims Distinctive? A Look at the Evidence

By *Steven Fish*

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Are Muslims Distinctive? is an exceptionally objective book that examines the highly subjective and controversial issue of Muslim 'exceptionalism.' Steven Fish employs numerical (mostly survey) data and statistical methods in analyzing whether and to what extent Muslim-majority societies are distinct from the rest of the world. His references to Indonesia, where he recently resided, enrich the book. Examining numerous socio-political issues, the book reveals that on some issues Muslim-majority societies are not different from others (e.g., personal piety and the relations between religion and politics), on some others they are better (e.g., socioeconomic inequality and homicide), while on others they are in worse conditions (e.g., terrorism, gender inequality, and democracy).

This is a very well written book, in which the author explores each issue by documenting the data, summarizing alternative explanations, and then analyzing both. One particularly thought-provoking aspect of the book is its brief discussions on religious texts. The author's ability to discuss the Qur'an and the *hadith* in comparison to the Bible is very impressive. On some issues, such as homosexuality, Fish elaborates that different views of Muslims (less favorable) and Christians are based on their various interpretations of essentially not so different religious texts. For example, he notes, "We would expect much higher support for the justifiability of divorce among Muslims than among Christians if holy writ determined opinion. Yet, Muslims exhibit less tolerance for divorce than Christians" (p. 108). The author's textual comparisons